On Pentecost

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Abstract

This reflection examines the Revised Common Lectionary readings for the Celebration of Pentecost — Acts 2.1-21, 1 Corinthians 12.3b-13, and John 20.19-23 — as three moments of a single act: Christ's sending of the disciples and the Holy Spirit's empowerment of that sending. In John 20, the risen Christ commissions the Apostles with the words "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," and breathes on them the gift of the Spirit by which they are to forgive sins and proclaim the Gospel — a moment the Oxford Bible Commentary describes as the disciples' being "baptized" by the risen Christ's Spirit. This Johannine baptism-by-breath is not a unique apostolic event but the same baptism into the Holy Spirit every Christian receives today: the sending the Apostles received, and the Spirit by which it was empowered, extend to every baptized person. In Acts 2, the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost manifests that commissioning in the world: the Apostles go forth and are heard, "each in their own dialect," in what the Commentary calls "a miracle of hearing." In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul explicates the structure of this empowered mission: a variety of spiritual gifts, one Spirit, one Body — so that to discern one's gift is to discern one's service. The reflection argues that Christ's sending is not an instruction the Apostles execute on their own strength, but a participation made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit, in which the Church — every baptized member — becomes the manifestation of the Father's sending of the Son in the world. Life in Christ, on this account, is constituted by being-sent-in-the incorporation into the *missio Dei* rather than self-initiated witness.

On Pentecost

<u>Part I</u>:

In the Gospel reading for today we are told Christ said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you." We are sent by Christ, called by God through Christ to ministry, to proclaim the good news of salvation, of life found in and through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit – the Church - by serving each other as Christ serves us. And we serve each other when follow His commandment by loving each other as He loves us. In so loving one another we are made one in Communion with each other in Christ and through each other in the Unity of His Spirit with Christ. We are made His message of eternal life manifest in our so being/living. This is life in Christ.

What makes life in Christ possible? God’s gift of His Grace through Christ, the Advocate, His Holy Spirit of unconditional love and forgiveness at work in our lives in and through us and others, binding all the church together as ONE in Christ, is what makes our life in Christ possible.

As I noted last week, probably, the Person of the Trinity that often tends to be considered least is the Holy Spirit. We think of the Father and the Son. We pray to them. We ask them for guidance. We ask them to be in our lives and “show us the way.” We ask for their comfort. But what of the Holy Spirit? The third Person of the Trinity? It is the Holy Spirit that is at the heart of the readings for today. And we find in the first reading that God’s Holy Spirit of unconditional love and forgiveness is He by Whom we are empowered to be witnesses to God’s love for all His creation through Christ. For it is by means of His Holy Spirit that the disciples were able to speak and be understood in a variety of languages.

> “When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Notably, according to the Oxford Bible Commentary:

> “Both wind and fire are associated with God’s self revelation in the HB: cf. Ex 19:16-19; 1 Kings 19:11-12; Isa 6:6. But the choice of these two images is particularly apt for the coming of the Spirit. ‘Wind,’ both in Hebrew and in Greek is closely associated with ‘spirit’. The image of fire links with the Spirit’s work of judgement (LK 3:16-17). And the metaphor of tongues (v.3) links with the fact that the result of this manifestation of divine power is inspired speech.” (p.1032)

It is by the Grace of His Holy Spirit that we are able to proclaim the Good News of Salvation. Further, it is by means of the same Spirit that we are able to hear the Good News of Salvation to all God’s Creation. Again, from the Oxford Bible Commentary:

> “But while some hear only a confused babble of ecstatic (or drunken?) voices (v.13) others hear ‘each in their own dialect’ a proclamation of God’s ‘great deeds’ (v.11). This is a miracle of hearing.” (p.1032).

How so? How is it that by means of His Holy Spirit we are able to proclaim the Good News of salvation? In our Epistle reading for today we find that it is through the Holy Spirit we have gifts by means of which

we can serve each other thereby loving each other as Christ loves us:

> "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Notably, in our the Gospel reading for today we have the "baptism" with the Holy Spirit of the Apostles, baptism that in inherently linked to their mission. Jesus says to His Apostles, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me so I send you. When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

> "…, the missionary work of the disciples depends on the mission of the Son and on the gift of the Holy Spirit. In His farewell discourse Jesus had promised that he would send the Helper. A first gift of the Spirit was already described in 19:30, but now the disciples are so to speak 'baptized' by the risen Christ's Spirit. V. 23, as Lk 24:47-49, the forgiveness of sins is linked to the gift of the Spirit and the disciples' missionary work. But John transforms the Lukan understanding of forgiveness with the help of material similar to Mt. 16:19 and 18:18. Matthew stresses Peter's and the other disciples' power to 'bind' and 'loose' certain rules in the assembly, whereas John speaks of retaining (binding) sins or forgiving them. Despite the present and future tenses in many MSS, the variant … (perfect passive, 'they are forgiven') is probably original. The Christian tradition early linked together Matthew and John in its understanding of penance." (pp. 997-998).

And in our first reading for today we have the result of their receiving the Holy Spirit – the ability to proclaim the message, the Gospel, the Good News to others.

Through baptism we too are cleansed, empowered, and forgiven our sins. We are cleansed of our sins and empowered with the Holy Spirit that leads us into all truth, giving us the ability to see/hear and live/proclaim in accordance with the Truth which is Christ by faith. We are reoriented from being for self to being for others (and thus) towards God in perception and act. The challenge is in the perceiving and the acting – seeing that we are to act for the common good each according to their need so that no one need be in need, left wanting. … . Share our gifts so that no one need be wanting and we feed our souls, we live in accordance with the Truth and we are born anew. What is made possible in Baptism is fulfilled in act through faith in Christ by means of/in the Unity of His Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit, then, that is the source of our guidance, with which we are cleansed in baptism, by which we are given gifts to hear (see) God at work in our lives through others and gifts to serve/love others as Christ serves/loves us, which is to say, proclaim the Word. Further, the Holy Spirit is the source of our willingness to and strength to persevere in His name when doing so seems contrary to our well being – which, of course it never is.

So, when we ask these things of God, then, when we asking for His help to guide us in the right direction, cleanse and strengthen us so that we might be willing and be able to follow through on following His direction in Christ and the gifts that make this possible we are asking for a gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. And today it is for that gift that we gather to celebrate**.**

Let us pray,

O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. ***Amen.***

Part II:

Again, we find in the readings we are called by Christ to continue His ministry, "As the Father has sent me, so now I send you," and His bestowing on us the means by which to do that for which He has sent us, His Holy Spirit, "When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But what has He sent us to do? We celebrate our reception of His Holy Spirit. We celebrate our empowerment with His Holy Spirit to answer Christ's call and the two are connected – which is to say reception of the Holy Spirit implies something. But what? Doing what Christ has sent us to do? Again, what is that?

Recall that in out Epistle for today we are told, "Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." If there is anything that is central to what Christ did, it is service. At the heart of His of His ministry was serving God's creation, and that includes us, especially those of us who are not serving others. We, then are to serve one another as Christ serves us.

But what sort of service? There is one Spirit through which or by means of which a variety of gifts are given – to some one kind of gift, to others another. Discern your gift(s) and you will find your service. And there is one God that activates our gifts of service to others. And though there are many people there is one Body of Christ in the world of which they are a member. According to the Oxford Bible Commentary:

> "…Paul introduces the metaphor of the body, … . … . The body was commonly used in antiquity as a metaphor for human society (or for the whole cosmos), as a variegated organism whose diverse parts are interdependent." (p.1127).

By acting on the gift(s) of the Holy Spirit and thus serving others in way(s) for which our gifts are well suited we will promote the health and unity of the Body of Christ and both directly – by actualizing our nature here and now via our helping others actualize theirs – and indirectly through others thereby promoting the health of that on which our health is dependent – the Body of Christ. In doing so we will carry the message of the good news of salvation to all we encounter – this being our ministry. Note, then, that it is by our being ministers of Christ that we live at all, find life in Christ. To live at all is to be ministers of Christ. And it is the gift from God through Christ of His Holy Spirit – the gift of the Third Person of the Trinity – that makes our ministries possible.

We, at Baptism, die to serving ourselves – division – and are born anew into the Body of Christ by serving one another with the gifts God gives us through Christ by means of His Holy Spirit. It is

God's gift of His Grace through Christ which makes our ministries/lives possible, His Holy Spirit, that today we gather to celebrate.

Let us pray,

O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. ***Amen.***

<u>Part III</u>: Some Final Points

1. Today we celebrate the birth of the church, the body of Christ in the world. According to Cowie and Gummer (1974):

   > "A further comparison may be made between the Jewish and Christian festivals of Pentecost. The giving of the Law of Moses came during the formative period of the Hebrew people and made possible the union of the twelve tribes into a single nation with a common moral standard. In the same way the gift of the Holy Spirit converted the disciples into the Church of God, the New Israel, devoted to the task of proclaiming Christ's message and performing His mission in the world. So Pentecost has sometimes been called the 'birthday of the Christian Church"' (pp. 101-102).

2. The church is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, God's gift of the Holy Spirit in us which we receive at baptism.

3. At baptism we receive God's gift of His Holy Spirit individually.

4. However, in so doing we become members of one body of Christ in the world.

5. In the Gospel Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

6. We, the church, the body of Christ in the world, are thus given our charge, our calling, to fulfill Christ's work in the world.

7. And what is that work? It is the reconciliation of God with His creation. So that we might be one with each other as Christ is one with the Father and through each other reconciled with God in the Unity of His Holy Spirit of unconditional love and forgiveness. It is to this end, then, that we all are called, and only to the extent that we answer His call that wee are, we live at all.

8. But how is this reconciliation accomplished? It is accomplished by our proclaiming the Good News of Salvation found in following Christ. To follow Christ is to do as He did, and, as has been previously noted this is to make our lives about serving others, being for others. For in being for others, serving others we proclaim in deed God's unconditional love and forgiveness for all His creation.

9. How, then, shall we serve one another? Here "how" is used in two senses, namely, by means of what shall we serve and in what way shall we serve. Here, again as noted earlier Saint Paul provides an answer. He claims,

> "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. … . All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, … . For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - … ."

   What makes our serving others possible is God's gift to us through Christ of the Holy Spirit. And not only does His gift of the Holy Spirit activate gifts of the spirit, according to Paul, but these gifts guide us as to how we are to serve. Discern your gift and you will discern your service.

10. And as already noted, we have an example of this in the first reading. The Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles making it possible for them to proclaim the Word to all people in their native tongue. The Holy Spirit at one and the same time made it possible for the Apostles to proclaim the Word and in so doing provided them with guidance as to how they were to serve. We are all members of one body saint Paul tells us, but we each have our particular function in that body, namely, that function for which our gifts are well suited.

11. Reconciliation of God with His creation is accomplished by our using the gifts of His Spirit given us by God to proclaim Christ's message of God's unconditional love and forgiveness for all His creation.

12. And this happens in our using our unique gifts for the common good, by serving in ways for which those gifts are well suited.

13. For it is in being for each other that we proclaim the good news of Salvation, Salvation that is found in our Unity, our being One in His Spirit, which is the result of our being for each other.

14. It is by being one with each other in His Spirit of unconditional love and forgiveness that we are reconciled with God.

15. And in so using our gifts of the Holy Spirit for the common good, our action thus being an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, that we are reborn to new life in Christ, new life found in being **ONE** in and through Christ in the Unity of His Holy Spirit, God's gift to us that He might live in us and thus we in Him.

16. It is, then, by means of God's gift through Christ of the Holy Spirit that we answer Christ's call to fulfill His work in the world and are thus reconciled with God, finding life in Him by His living in us.

17. And it is for this gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit, Third Person of the Trinity, that today we gather to celebrate.

Let us pray,

Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

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